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TAGS: [PARM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [IT](#) [UNSC](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#) [NATO](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ: TALABANI IN ROME URGES NO HASTY TROOP MOVES

Classified By: Pol M/C David Pearce for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. During his November 7-13 visit to Italy, Iraqi President Talabani discussed current developments in Iraq and Iraqi relations with Syrian, Iran and Turkey with Embassy officials. Talabani received assurances from Italian center-left leaders that they would not withdraw Italian troops too soon should they win the upcoming elections and would only do so in consultation with the GOI and coalition partners. He was optimistic on the improving security situation in Iraq and on prospects for the upcoming Iraqi elections, but warned against continuing interference from Syria and Iran. End summary.

To Center-Left Leaders: No Precipitate Troop Withdrawal

12. (C) Pol M/C and Pol-Mil Counselor met with Iraqi President Talabani in Rome on November 12. Talabani, who arrived in Rome November 7 and held meetings with President Ciampi, PM Berlusconi and FM Fini, Senate President Pera, Chamber of Deputies President Casini, and center-left leaders said his trip to Italy had been successful. He made a point of meeting four major opposition leaders and urged them all not to make precipitate moves with Italian troops in the event of a center-left victory in elections next April. Of course we will survive if you take your troops out, he told them, but it won't be good for you, or for us, and it will encourage the terrorists to think they had made a gain. He felt all four got the message, and all indicated that any changes would not be made in a disruptive way, but gradually and in full coordination with the Iraqi government and other troop contributors according to conditions on the ground. Prodi was the least receptive, he said, but came around in the end.

13. (C) In his meeting with PM Berlusconi (whose center-right coalition is currently trailing the center-left in polls), Talabani said he had joked that many great men, like Churchill, had been defeated politically after major accomplishments. Berlusconi said that may well be true, but he didn't plan to join them, he planned to win.

Progress in Combating Terrorists

14. (C) Talabani said the important next step in Iraq was the December election. The security situation was gradually but steadily improving; the terrorists had been reduced to relying on car bombs and controlled less territory. They had been on the verge of controlling Mosul, but that city was safe now, and they had been expelled easily from Tal Afar. They had made a major mistake by killing women and children -- this turned almost all of the population against them. Some of the tribes had begun to turn on them, including in the West. Zargawi and his group were increasingly isolated. The GOI currently had 200,000 men under arms ("which should be enough for Iraq"), and training was continuing.

15. (C) Sunni participation would be greater in the December elections, Talabani continued, and there would be fewer Shia seats in the new parliament. He felt a substantial number of Sunnis who had not voted in the first election or referendum were supportive of the government and the new constitution.

16. (C) Talabani commented that US Ambassador Khalilzad was very good and very active. He understood the situation in Iraq well and was "tireless."

Syria a Major Problem

17. (C) Syria, and especially the Syrian border, was a problem, Talabani said. Many of the terrorists captured in Iraq had come from Syria. Damascus claimed the border was hard to control, but everyone who knew the Syrian regime well knew this was a fiction. If the SARG wanted, he said, "not even birds could fly across." Talabani professed to be puzzled by Damascus policies. The direction seemed to be coming from the top, from Bashar and his family. No one else would dare to make such trouble for the US in Iraq.

18. (C) Bashar had pressured and threatened Hariri before his

death. Ex-Syrian FM Abd al-Halim Khaddam, now retired in Paris, had told the Syrian leader at the time that it was a mistake to threaten to break Lebanon over Hariri's and Jumblatt's heads over the issue of extending President Lahoud's mandate. Bashar's latest speech was "very foolish."

9. (C) The Syrians seemed to think they could use the old "steadfastness and confrontation" approach in response to the pressures from the US, France, and others on Iraq, Lebanon and terrorism. They had argued until the last minute that there would be no war to replace Saddam (and war, Talabani added, was regrettably the only way Saddam could ever be displaced). They feared the example of a democratic Iraq, and they feared being surrounded on all sides by countries that were friendly to the US.

10. (C) SARG leaders were trying to act like Hafiz al-Asad, but they didn't have the same skills. Hafiz al-Asad would have known when to make a strategic shift. This regime had lost its best friend in the West, French President Chirac, who was now in the lead against them. They had also alienated key Arab friends, like Saudi Arabia.

11. (C) Talabani said the Syrian government had invited him to visit Syria (Talabani has long-standing ties to Damascus, and founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan there in the mid-1970s). But he told the Syrians there were three obstacles to better relations: 1) they needed to change the tone of their media and stop referring to the terrorists as a legitimate resistance and insurgency; 2) they needed to expel the former Iraq regime leaders now in Syria (he said a number were in the Aleppo area and apartments in Damascus; he speculated that Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri had died in Syria); and 3) stop the flow of terrorists across the border. He said he would not contemplate a visit until there had at least been a real change in media tone.

12. (C) A Syrian delegation had visited Baghdad recently but had not been received well. The Shia, in particular, were angry with Damascus because they identified the Syrian regime with support for the terrorists who were carrying out the killings in Iraq.

Iranians Even More Problematic -----

13. (C/NF) Talabani said the Iranian "brothers" were being very clever, more clever than the Syrians. He felt Iran and Syria coordinated on Iraq, but the Iranians managed to keep the Syrians out front, taking more of the heat. The Iranians were sending their terrorists to set off bombs in the Sunni areas so that the US and others would think all the trouble was in the Sunni areas and with the Sunnis. He said Tehran feared a US turn toward the Sunnis to try and secure their participation, at the expense of the Shia.

14. (C) Iran's influence with Iraq's Shia would always have limits, he said. Iran would never be able to control the Iraqi Shia. The Shia "Vatican" is in Iraq, at Najaf and Karbala. And Ayatollah Sistani is a real ayatollah, with much stronger religious credentials than Khamenei.

15. (C) The MEK remained in a camp in Iraq, controlled by US forces, but still conducting some anti-Iran activity, Talabani said. Iran wanted them expelled. A small number had gone back to Iran, but most remained; few third countries had stepped forward to offer them refuge.

Turkey -----

16. (C/NF) Similarly, the PKK remained at Qandil mountain. They had recently made a bad decision to send some people into Turkey to fight. Talabani said he wondered if the PKK were not under Turkish military control. It was strange, he said he had told Turkish PM Erdogan, how people in a Turkish jail are able to send orders and plans to the PKK in the mountains. "That's democracy," Erdogan reportedly replied.

17. (C/NF) Talabani said he had good relations with Erdogan and the civilian leaders (but by implication, not with the Turkish military). KDP leader Barzani's ties with Ankara remained difficult. Still, Barzani felt the Turkish government recognized that, whatever their views in the past, they needed to deal with Talabani now as the president of Iraq, and Barzani as the president of the north. (Talabani was planning to see Barzani in Vienna this week and said relations between them were excellent.) He said the GOT was disappointed -- they now realize that they were being deceived by the Iraqi Turkmen, who did not represent 15 percent of the population, as they had claimed, and were only able to win two seats in the national assembly.

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